

BEYOND
THE
WHITE
STONE
LIONS

LAMONT B. STEPTOE

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Edited by Sean Lynch

radical paper press

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American academics guard poetry with more than just white stone lions. They shield poems from the masses with barbed wire MFA degrees. They befuddle readers with obscure references and ostentatious drivel. They proclaim poetry to be worthless or dead, only to sneakily enjoy the funding of various grants dedicating millions of dollars every year to a select few. Lamont Steptoe's poetry fights against this elitist regression with profound, yet down to earth language. It is without question that the academia desires absolute power over the granting of literary recognition. An academic outsider and working-class, bi-sexual black man, Lamont Steptoe thrives despite the repression.

Rich white men ruled the western literary world for centuries. For the latter half of the twentieth century, rich white women were able to get mainstream literary credibility as well. It took only until the second decade of the twenty first century for bourgeois people of color to obtain widespread recognition in literary academia. Now many universities seek diversity for the sake of diversity in order to look like they're not racist.

Of course there were brilliant blips in the radar throughout the twentieth century. The most outstanding black poet achieving academic recognition was Gwendolyn Brooks, but she's an exception to the rule. However, even after Brooks achieved her fame and academic status, she sought to bring up her peers by developing the non-academic Black Arts Movement in the late 60's. Those peers: Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Etheridge Knight to name a few, were forebears for what Lamont Steptoe represents now.

Lamont Steptoe's public poetic career began in the early 1980's when he came in contact with the poetry prophets of the Black Arts Movement. James Baldwin, Samuel Allen, and Dennis Brutus would become Steptoe's literary mentors. As the coordinator for the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia and the Walt Whitman Center in Camden, Steptoe had the opportunity to meet countless famous poets, and the ability to invite legends like Gwendolyn Brooks to read for

him. The accessibility of Lamont Steptoe's language stems from these literary greats, and it's the key to what makes his poetry powerful.

When Steptoe was a child, he keenly noticed the white stone lions who would guard the library he frequented in Pittsburgh. Steptoe's avid reading and dreaming was all he had as a poor black kid in the crumbling rust belt. His growing up experience hinged on survival. It was "...Makin' due with nothin' minus nothin'..." and in order to have any intellectual development, young Steptoe needed to "...Carry dreams like switchblades..." because black culture was "...So beautiful the world has to lie / And tell us different." The aforementioned rhetoric in Steptoe's poetry never comes off as cliché, instead, his phraseology reflects the fantastical resistance and resolute willpower necessary for a brilliant black boy to withstand the daily oppression of empire and blossom into a poet. The following poems represent Steptoe's struggle, and it's my hope that reading this chapbook will ignite the creativity of other academic outsider poets.

Sean Lynch

UNTITLED

Poets arrive
Drunk
Or smoked up
Highed up on something
You ain't never heard of
It is my duty to be drunk
It is my duty to be high
It is my duty to be
Out-fuckin'-rageous!

FOR AMIRI BARAKA

Back in the day
Television was black and white
No colored folks in commercials
No colored folks as news anchors
There was more color in cartoons
At the movie houses than on tv
While we stood in bread lines
To get powdered eggs and peanut butter
Canned spam and powdered milk
Back in the day we smoldered
Like a dormant volcano
But when the sixties came
We exploded set cities on fire
Water hosed bitten
By dogs we picked up molotov cocktails
Became snipers and revolutionaries
Had redbooks in our pockets
Demanded civil rights
In the blazing nights...

SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare
Ain't got nothin' on me!!!
Except
He was free!

WHEN I AM DEAD

When
I am dead
Or
Ascended
Do not hide
The lust I lived
After all
I was human
And so was
Langston...

POETS

Poets are supposed to make
People cry...
Or sigh...
Or die...

FAR FLUNG GALAXIES

On the steps
The Black boy dreams of tomorrows
Crystal thought ships arise from his head
Drenched in rainbows they shimmer
Like the gossamer of a dragonfly's wings
Illuminated like the light of fireflies
They float upwards into the clouds
Pulse beats of drums barely audible
Far flung galaxies call them home

BULLETS AND FIRE

How many times did Louis Armstrong cross the Atlantic
All those spirits beneath the wings of his plane holding him up?
So he could keep making his sweet truth scat and skate and simmer
Bloom forever in a global garden making sure that other po' Black boys
Born with music in their blood could arise from the mud
Roll up Park Avenue in shiny limos to celebrate solid gold and platinum
Records inspired by this sonic shaman from Catfish row
Who loved his people don't 'cha know
His music was sugarcane and white folks made him rich
But there is bullets in his music and fire too!

THE PARENTS OF GLORY

We are ruled by madness
That of the oppressor and that that consumes us internally
Ancient gods rattle the cages of our souls
Infuriated at our state
We have not been sane for centuries
Thus we know the labyrinths of darkness
Moving through the intestines of a white hot god
Who burns us to ashes in our sleep
We have weeped ourselves dry
Walking as desert men across savannahs of salt
Flame is our water and dust is our bread
We call back the sacred dead to fill the ranks of warriors
We mold armies from the seas of our planet
Shape the light of the sun as our grenades
Mix bones and rain with vengeance
Engine such creatures with blizzards of sorrow
Suit them in whirlwinds to erase the cartoons of history
We own all mysteries and are the parents of Glory
We will turn time inside out
Map memory as truth

SPACE WAVE LOGIC

Sun Ra

Cosmos genius of space wave logic
Starseed of Nubian renown
Neoned boned luminosity Black Pharaoh of Catfish Row
Bebop mad riding the chariot of a Steinway
"Space is the place" his mantra
"Do you want a one way or a round trip?" his question
Galactic outsider of the politics of freedom
'Bama man Upsouth and jet setter
Waving his robes and gowns like banners
In the face of unbelievers and believers
Polyrhythmic Moses scrambling all your beliefs
Like pig brains and eggs
Some kinda Dark Jesus of Germantown, Philadelphia
With Arkestra disciples
Pounding drums and blowing horns to wake you from sleep
Born in the crucible of "swing" he swung
Into the outer limits of the real made a deal
With what he found to return and preach the truth
To convert and subvert the square world
Wake walk his way to the New Day
Every performance was a launching from Earth
Out pass the Moon

"Out" was Bible and Commandments
To the unblessed it seemed like babble
To the ordained it was gospel on acid
A pudding of psychedelic mushrooms
A jubilee and juneteenth of deep space Gnostic wisdom
Will all the starseeds stand and be counted?
A cosmic Ark is enroute
Under the command of Captain Henry Dumas
Let all the brothers say, "Amen!"
Let all the sisters say, "Amen!"
Hold your head a little higher!
Put more pep in your step!
Dust off your dreams!
Forget about your schemes!
A civilization of magic awaits your arrival!

SO BEAUTIFUL THE WORLD HAS TO LIE

We live a blue history
Turned into invisible mystery
Makin' due with nothin' minus nothin'
Carry dreams like switchblades
So beautiful the world has to lie
And tell us different
Our faces be illuminated scripture
Of ages past and ages yet to be
Whoever made us baked us in fires
That forever branded us with the desire for freedom
We wounded dreamers deposed of empires
Royal paupers learning magic all over again
We read the stars and cast our bones
To understand the Ancestors' will
All the blues of our lives is changing with the yellow gold
Of our thoughts
A green future is all our tomorrows

BONE TIME

I tell time with my bones
Listen to the history they have lived
Know what the weather be days in advance
I've seen my skull without my face
Lying in a lonesome place
All the dreams I've ever had charging stallions
Of lightning and woe
Engines of beauty saddled by truth
Racing to wonder and glory

THE PAST AGAIN

The first day of September
A category two hurricane batters New Orleans, again
Shrieking winds ordering ghosts to pay attention
To the laws of the wind
No gumbo today down "Nawlins" way!
No gator tails red beans and rice
No crayfish spiced with cayenne
Just wind and water and boarded up windows
A year and three days since Katrina
Remembrance as storm as ship of wind loaded with spirits
Of the former enslaved come to walk the streets of a city
That weighted them with chains
Now the past again in mightier form
Uttering a language that flashes with lightning
Rumbles with thunder
Who's walking here?
Agony anguish rage and justice!
We are washing houses with truth
Carving time with a knife of wind
We are sending residents out on the road to be blessed
Our orders to stay here!
You must migrate migrate and return to better understand
The place you dwell!

We are washing history in a washtub on the scrub board of time!
We are building a crystal city constructing a beacon of diamond
All eyes will know it's blinding glare!
Crescent City Holy Land America's Africa!
Juju city of power and mystery
What headlines you make, what hearts you move!
Crucible of Alchemy wear your wounds like medals
Gleam like gold with your history
Keep music and song as your banners
Celebrate yourself with feasts on every street!
Celebrate yourself!
Teach the world the wisdom of the wind!

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Everyone died
Leavin' a bunch of loose ends
For the livin'
Folks passed away slowly or suddenly
Insurance policies not enough to spit at
Barely bought a cheap coffin
With a sickly funeral director
Whose whole life was buryin'
Black folks with no money
Everyone died
Leavin' nothin' but loose ends
Jesus and Amens in dey wakes
Everyone died from oppression
One way or another

CALLED OUR NAMES

Are your lips dust or air?
Are you entombed in earth or scattered as ash
Along the streets you roamed?
Such things are irrelevant to you now
As you explore your new world
You are now the vanished—an Ancestor with knowledge
Beyond incarnate understanding
Are you amazed?
I'm told you told those who loved you to "Let me go!"
You have soared beyond our history
Beyond nights when we burned with passion
Beyond the nights when darkness called our names
Taught us a language that allowed us
To walk from galaxy to galaxy

RAGE

Rage is a fire
That can illuminate
The crystal vase of the body
Making it a beacon or lighthouse
Turning it into a supernova of consciousness
A blinding construction that collapses to black hole
That moans forever and swallows creation

ANCESTORS IN THE GIT GONE

Black folks love they fish!
Croakers
Sea bass
Weakfish
Catfish
Salmon
Porgies
Bluefish
Red snapper
Spots
Jumbo shrimp
So many Ancestors in the git gone
Who dined on loaves and fishes
Are we eating to remember the many thousands gone
Resting on the bottom of the sea?
Sunlight and blue water their last memory
The liquid sky ruled by the moon
Moaning and moaning in the scarlet wound of history

HEAVEN IS HERE!

Yes,
There are living Saints!
Not all the Saints are dead!
They yet walk among us
Wearing their skin like a robe
Heaven is here!
We are standing on galaxies
Lie down on a bed of stars
Look at each other
Open the one true eye
Let the glory it reveals
Blind you!

DARK NIGHTS INTO HIGH NOONS

Sing your struggle!
Create myths and stories
Uplift Truth like a Divine Pharaoh!
Turn those dark nights into high noons into dawn itself!
Let every wound be a rhythm!
Let every march be an age!
Make songs of your blood!
Be that vessel golden tongued with testimonials!
Tell what you know!
Be more than terracotta!
Be more than clay!

BEANS AND BREAD

Sometimes life ain't nothin' but a can of beans
A cup of tea
Anything that dulls the knives of hunger
Sharpening themselves on the whetstone of the belly
Thank God for bread that keeps me separate from the dead!
Thank God for beans!
Thank God for greens!
Thank God for neckbones rice and visions of paradise!
Thank God for tomorrow that might bring dough
Erase today's misery and woe!

STAR TALK

At this quiet hour I can hear the stars discussing me
Intergalactic phone lines buzzing
They call me "the sleepless one"
They call me "the hermit's lamp"
They call me "the soldier-who-does-not-forget-the-war"
At this quiet hour I can hear the stars
Placing bets on minotaurs and unicorns
And wounded poets whose only companion
Is memory

ELIJAH

Elijah was a dark skinned countrified boy
Long football head who wore "clod hoppers"
Seems like he always wore suspenders as well
"doe eyed" and minstrel lipped
His face floating among playmates
One day he wasn't at school in the third grade anymore
His appendix burst
We wondered what street death lived on

NINE IN ONE WEEK

They could've listened to some jazz
They could've went to a movie
They could've masturbated
They could've gone to the library
And fallen asleep and dreamed
All the knowledge into their souls
But they did none of these things
Instead they begged, borrowed, or stole
Dead presidents and went to a house
On a street littered with refuse
Knocked on a door that barely opened
Gave up the presidents for a powerful antidote
To a madhouse of nightmares
Made it to an alley, abandoned house or apartment
Ripped open a package like you open a bag of chips
Poured the contents into a spoon
Lit a match to cook a bitter sugar
To a clear liquid took a needle filled it like a fountain pen
Belted an arm found a vein answered their pain
Nodded into a dream so deep it turned into a grave
Nine in one week!

OPEN BOOK OF WONDER

Imagine

A thousand thousand spirits

Who perished

Tumbling through blue air

Of the Atlantic ocean

Their frantic motion dance of dying and crying

Weighted with block and tackle

Imagine

Their spirits rising like ancient bubbles

Clear and transparent

Floating on the surface of waves

Like jellyfish...

Waiting..

For centuries

Waiting for centuries...

Imagine

A small po' Black child in some American city

Everything against him

'cept his Ancestors and God

An open book of wonder

Imagine

One of those clear ancient floating bubbles

Lifting off like a balloon

Encoded

With the DNA of that po' Black child

That open book of wonder

Drifting and drifting and drifting

'til it finds that American city

That little Black boy

Empties its silver calabash of seed wisdom

Into the living chalice of his head and heart

Imagine

That strange little boy

Juju'd with Ancestors

So holy

His Momma her Momma and every Ancestor

On back to the beginning had orishas

Ownin' dey lives

BEYOND THE WHITE STONE LIONS

My favorite place to be alone as a child
Was the public library
Where I was befriended by two spinster librarians
Who intuitively felt
There might be something
To this odd little Black boy
Bowlegged and scruffy
Whose eyes burned with his passion for knowledge
There beyond the white stone lions
That guarded the entrance
Behind the double screened doors
Into the marbled interior
There is where it all began
Under that roof flooded with light from the transom
And skylights
This is where I dreamed the dream of writing books
Of becoming a believer of fantastic and impossible worlds

PROBLEM

Multiply this anger this rage this chaos
Multiply by a million blocks
Ten million families
Multiply and then cube that sum
Then cube that sum again
The answer
Will be war and darkness
War and darkness

Lamont B. Steptoe was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is the author of fourteen collections of poetry while also serving as editor for two books by the late South African poet Dennis Brutus entitled *REMEMBERING* and *leafdrift*.

Steptoe is the winner of an American Book Award and a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. He has also been awarded two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts awards.

Steptoe is a Vietnam veteran and has read his poems in France, Nicaragua, Holland, Lithuania, and India. His most recent publications include *A Long Movie of Shadows*, *Crowns & Halos*, *Oracular Rumblings & Stilt Walking*, and *Meditations In Congo Square*. Steptoe is the founder and publisher of Whirlwind Press.

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